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ABSTRACT

In order to help underprepared students entering college in an open admissions program learn to write original research papers, a method was devised which relates the students' experiences in the nonacademic world to their academic assignments. Students first visit a local business, store, or institution with which they are familiar and write an observation report of the visit; they then return to the place of observation and interview at least one person there. At this point, the students are ready to choose a subject for a research paper about some aspect of their observations. A series of assignments is used to help students gather and evaluate information from secondary sources, formulate a thesis, and organize, write, and evaluate their papers. Direct teaching is done in response to felt needs. Before the teacher evaluates the papers, the class devises evaluation criteria, and students read and evaluate each other's papers and hold follow-up conferences. This method helps students realize that, in the alien academic world, their own eyes and ears can be capable research tools. (GW)

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Writing a Research Paper -- A Vital Survival Skill in College

Writing an original research paper involves an ability to perform a variety of complicated skills that presupposes a series of experiences with diversified reading and writing tasks. The teacher who assigns a research paper to a freshman assumes that the student knows how to analyze and interpret the content of what others have written, synthesize it with other reading and his own experience, abstract material from original and secondary sources and organize it into a long piece of writing with correct form and documentation. The teacher of remedial students in an Open Admissions reading program cannot assume that his students have been introduced to any of these skills beyond making the most superficial kind of summaries. The need to acquire these skills as quickly as possible is a basic fact of survival for the entering college student. Grossly underprepared students can be encouraged and motivated to write original, well documented research papers which demonstrate a mastery of sophisticated reading and writing skills without following the many sequential steps described in research manuals.

Relating the underprepared student's experience in the non-academic world to his assignments in the academic environment is the method I used to bridge the many gaps in my students' training.

The first two assignments, derived from James Moffett's A Student Centered Language Arts Program, beginning with direct observation and going on to interviews, are essential to making the transition to formal research. Although I agree with Moffett that most research assignments that require students to gather information only from books that are already high-level syntheses encourage the student to rearrange, rework and regurgitate material producing

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nothing more than a fancy book report, I believe that the underprepared student needs to test his own observations against published materials and learn how to judge the reliability of secondary sources as well as to utilize them to support his own experiences and perceptions. Therefore, he must use at least five secondary sources in his paper. This requirement also makes it possible for students to gain knowledge of the kind of documentation and material they will have to use in many of their future college assignments.

In this paper I will discuss the specific assignments used in teaching research skills as well as preparatory lessons related to the research project. The examples will be from student papers and taped oral interviews.

I prefer to give students specific assignments in writing, with a definite timetable and due-date, although I frequently have to revise the dates. In general, the assignments are given with a limited amount of directions but with time for clarification in class. Most of the skills are taught after the students have tried to do them from the assignment sheet. All assignments are evaluated on a satisfactory and incomplete scale and all incomplete assignments are expected to be redone. The specific assignments follow the traditional steps in writing a research paper: (1) choosing a subject, (2) narrowing the subject, (3) identifying the problem area, (4) collecting and evaluating evidence, (5) formulating a thesis, (6) organizing the paper, (7) writing the paper and (8) evaluating the paper. It is, however, steps 1 - 3 that are most crucial to this approach and I will discuss them in more detail.

The difficult and frustrating experience of choosing and narrowing a topic was accomplished by two assignments. The first was, "go to a place of business, neighborhood store or local institution you are familiar with and write an observation report of the visit". The students went to familiar places like local supermarkets, Welfare Department, community organizations and factories and stores in which they worked.

We read their completed reports in class and focused on the relationships between observable facts, inferences and opinions. A segment of the Wiseman Documentary Film The Welfare Department was viewed by the whole class and they compared their observations of the events in the film.

The second assignment was, "return to the place of observation and interview at least one person there". This assignment was accompanied by reading of several interviews in "Working" by Studs Turkel, viewing the television interviews and discussing the questioning and interviewing techniques. The questions led to an exercise in narrowing the point of view or emphasis. At this point the students were ready to choose a direction for their research paper without being influenced by written research. Some examples of the topics students investigated were; a study of the noise factor in a small sewing factory in Chinatown, the employee-employer relationships at MacDonalds, a program for retarded children in a Catholic School, the high losses resulting from shoplifting in a local five and ten and the loneliness of the elderly in Nursing Homes.

The following are specific examples of students experiences offered to indicate the developmental process that results from beginning with observations and interviews. Wai, a resident of Chinatown began with a visit to a local Chinese Community Center. Her original observation report was brief and focused on a teenage program she observed. She returned to interview the director who emphasized the financial problems of the center and briefly described programs for the elderly and non-English speaking. Her observations and interview offered many options for narrowing a topic, the most obvious being the youth program or the financial needs of the center. However, Wai was mostinterested in the senior citizen program and the special needs of the Chinese elderly. She began by returning to the center for another observation of that program and an investigation of the library material on the subject. Her second visit led to

the discovery that there was a special nursing facility for the Chinese elderly. Wai was quite shy and reluctant to visit this facility alone, but I encouraged her to arrange a visit with another girl who had begun her research in a nursing home and was concentrating on the relationship between the cost and quality of care in nursing homes. Wai reported in her second observation..."some of the patients were sleeping. Of those that were awake, some were sitting in the wheel chairs outside in the hallway; a few were walking slowly back and forth along the hall. Those that were sitting in the hallway would hardly talk to one another. They just sat there and stared at the wall." Miriam, the second student, made entirely different discoveries. She observed that the main reason that many of the patients were transferred from another nursing home was because the first home did not provide traditional Chinese food. She also discussed the importance of food costs to the quality of care in nursing homes.

Two students in one class visited small sewing factories where they had worked. The first student reported, "I went to one of the sewing factories in Chatham Square. From the outside look of the building, it was very old already.... While I was approaching the stairs some kind of unclean odors struck my nose, because the stairs are filled with garbage.... The factory was just like the stairs, garbage all over the place... the bathroom smelled so bad, no one could go in there... no fire escape..." She returned to question the boss and a worker. When she touched upon the sanitary conditions the boss replied " I am very busy now - I will answer your questions some other time." The worker when asked "Why don't you work some place else?" replied, "Everywhere is the same because the boss know thats the kind of work most of the people can handle." Both these remarks are well integrated in her final paper on "The Need for Government Regulation of Small Factories."

Another student visited a different factory and was greeted by a

benevolent boss who provided "tea breaks" and "flexible hours for working mothers". She was eager to investigate economic problems of a small clothing factory, but she could not find enough material in the library. She choose a secondary problem from her observation, the noise level in the factory and the affect it had upon the workers. The contrasting observations were discussed in class as a means of helping the students to understand and evaluate conflicting information in secondary sources.

Returning to a former job or observing in a current part-time job were popular choices for the observation assignment. One young man returned to a Wall Street firm where he delivered stock transactions. He reported that in his interview of a former supervisor, he learned for the first time what was in the mysterious envelopes he carried for years.

Day Care Centers were visited by several student mothers. One young mother was delighted with the opportunity to observe and interview teachers at the center her child was attending, another student used the research project as a way of clarifying her own doubts about the possiblity of day care for her own child.

The final step in developing a working hypothesis was to locate and duplicate a general periodical article on a subject derrived from the observations and interviews. The article had to be analyzed for its thesis and supporting information. Sample articles and the observations and interviews ware discussed in class to examine the process of narrowing a topic and identifying a working hypothesis. The use of student models and current problems enabled the students to become familiar with each others work and to help each other.

The process of researching the paper from "collecting and evaluating evidence" to "writing a formal research paper", was accomplished by a series of assignments. Progress reports including bibliography cards, note cards,

thesis statements and outlines were checked periodically. Direct teaching was done as an answer to a felt need, not as a model to follow. When students were well into their papers, I showed them sample student papers and discussed the organization and format. The last step before the teacher evaluation was a reciprocal student evaluation. The class devised criteria and each student was responsible for a written evaluation and follow-up conference with the student whose paper he was reading.

I am enthusiastic about this method of teaching a research paper because the papers were far more interesting and original. Most important was the educational advantage that results from students realizing that in the alien academic world, their own eyes and ears are capable tools of research when utilized in a careful and objective way. Underprepared students, more than students from traditional academic backgrounds, tend to divorce the real world from the academic world; their feelings of educational inadequacy seem to negate their confidence in their own experiences. It is essential to demonstrate to them that their experience and knowledge can be treated in an academic style.